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WASHINGTON POST
14 January 1985

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The Slow Pace of Peace

PARIS—Lt. Col. Gen. Louis des Balbes de Berton de Crillon, whose name graces a historical hotel here, is oddly eulogized on a plaque in the hotel lobby: "Hang yourself, brave Crillon. We fought at Arques and you were not there." Dutifully inspired by that admonition from Henry IV in 1589, swarms of journalists have crowded into the Crillon and followed each other in overpowering numbers to Geneva and other assembly sites to fight over peace-table scraps.

As you may have noticed from the media blitz at the Shultz-Gromyko talks, the message lives on.

But just as Crillon had his excuse (the king was only kidding), so I had mine for passing up the Geneva extravaganza. The point is not that datelines and deadlines don't matter and still less that nothing happened. An agreement to go back to bargaining on arms control is something, after a 13-month break. But even the principal participants could not tell you, even if they would, whether what did happen will turn out for better

—or, as has been more often the case, for nothing, or for worse.

The two sides were talking only about how to start talking in earnest on a package of arms-control issues so comprehensive and complex that the negotiations could easily outlast the Reagan presidency. At best, the painful process of productive diplomacy is not going to gratify for long the appetite of the American public for spectator sports. At worst, it will be prey over time to the pitfalls of Western political imperatives—impatience, electoral timetables and the shock waves of unforeseeable developments.

In this sense, Geneva's pressure-cooked postmortems are less instructive than the voices of experience. The perspective from Paris (and the Hotel de Crillon) offers a useful point of departure for an assessment of Geneva's risks and possible rewards.

The truisms come trippingly. "Peace is a process," Henry Kissinger regularly reminds us. But run the reel backwards and that's what British Prime Minister

Harold Macmillan said on arrival in Paris for the Big Four summit conference in 1960. He would fashion out of that meeting a "chain of peaks" by way of institutionalizing and de-glamorizing summitry.

But an American U-2 spy plane had just been shot down over Soviet territory. In the Crillon's corridors and meeting halls the bad news broke: Nikita Khrushchev was taking his revenge by showing up only long enough to shoot the meeting down.

Interestingly enough, the U-2 flights were the unilateral U.S. response to the Soviets' rejection at a 1955 summit meeting in Geneva of President Eisenhower's "Open Skies" proposal for reciprocal U.S.-Soviet aerial surveillance. The idea was no more fanciful then than Ronald Reagan's dream today of developing a leak-proof defense against nuclear weapons, and no more acceptable to the Soviets despite all its promise of making nuclear weapons "impossible and obsolete" once and for all.

Still, a "Spirit of Geneva" wafted out of that gathering, only to be blown away when the Soviets started shipping arms to Egypt before the year was out. The United States canceled its aid for Egypt's Aswan Dam; Egypt's President Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in retaliation; the French and British responded by joining Israel in the Suez War; the Soviets threatened to rain rockets down on London and Paris, even as they were brutalizing Hungary.

The catalog of dashed hopes would have to include the marathon Big Four foreign-ministers meeting in Geneva in 1959 to deal with Berlin and German reunification. The tension growing out of the stalemate was broken only by an invitation to Khrushchev to visit Washington. Out of this came a new spirit (of Camp David)—even as the Soviets were consolidating their grip on Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba.

John F. Kennedy's early outreach to Khrushchev in the 1961 Vienna summit was rewarded by miscalculation and the Soviet installation of nuclear missiles in Cuba. While Gerald Ford

was defining limited common interests with the Soviets in Vladivostok, the Soviets were moving in Ethiopia, Angola, the Yemen. Jimmy Carter's SALT II agreement, seven hard years in the making, was robbed of Senate ratification by Afghanistan.

This is not to dismiss achievements hard won along the way by cool and patient diplomacy, benignly neglected by publicity's hot glare: the Austrian Treaty, the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Agreement, SALT I in 1972. It is only to say that the currently fashionable and least felicitous of Winston Churchill's famous quotations—"Jaw-jaw is better than war-war"—begs the question.

Anything is better than nuclear war-war. The question is whether the jawers have a common interest and the jawing is accompanied by a shared sense of what sort of behavior on both sides is tolerable; "linkage" is as much a fact of political life as it is a conscious strategy. And on that critical question, the jury is out and is likely to remain so for many months, and maybe many years.